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ABSTRACT

The ongoing work life of four classes of elementary school children from relatively affluent families was examined for approximately 2 years by a participant observer/classroom teacher in an attempt to identify possible causes of student alienation, i.e., negative, unproductive or disruptive behaviors. Examples of such behaviors include hostility, rebelliousness, passivity, withdrawal, lack of a sense of responsibility for learning and getting work done, work of poor quality, disinterest, and a lack of involvement and initiative. In addition to observing the structure and organization of classroom behavior in relationship to the students' working conditions, several techniques were used to find out what the children were thinking and feeling about learning and goals. These methods were Developing Understanding of Self and Others, Values Clarification Lessons, Goldfish Bowl Discussions, Self Awareness Units, and Glasser Circle Discussions. Following the collection of data, two more years were spent designing, implementing, and evaluating a less alienating curriculum and classroom organization. An additional year was spent organizing the data, reading, theorizing and formally describing the results of the study. This presentation provides (1) background information related to the study, (2) selections from the data which illustrate how the core themes of the analysis evolved, (3) a discussion of the use of the theory of alienation, and (4) a description of how the "experimental" classroom was implemented and evaluated. Outcomes of the classroom intervention are described. (Author/RH)

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An Exploratory Look at Alienation in Elementary School Children

by

Jean M. Williams

Paper presented at Midwestern Regional Conference on Qualitative Research on Education (October 16-17, 1981).

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ABSTRACT

An Exploratory Look at Alienation

in Elementary School Children

A phenomenological, descriptive research project was carried out over a four year period in a suburban elementary school. It consisted of observations, and living and teaching in the research environment. Children's behaviors were analyzed and interpreted using alienation theory, as it applies to classroom work processes. Then a Self-Selection classroom and curriculum were designed and implemented to create greater opportunities for children to choose learning experiences and accept responsibility for them. Children evidenced a definite increase in persistence toward their tasks and in enthusiasm for learning. Discipline problems were sharply reduced, and the necessity to provide motivation for learning was lessened.

Oct. 18, 1981 Jean M. Williams

I used the word exploratory in the title of this paper, because I am very aware that alienation is a complex and elusive concept. This study examined the ongoing work life of four classes of elementary school children to try to understand possible causes of negative, unproductive or disruptive behaviors. Examples of these behaviors include hostility, rebelliousness, passivity, withdrawal, lack of a sense of responsibility for learning and getting work done, poor quality work, disinterest, and a lack of involvement and initiative.

Alienation means to have feelings of strangeness, of not belonging, not having something to care deeply about, not liking or wanting to do or be a part of something.

Although the word does seem weighted with sociological importance, it appeared to me to be particularly apt in describing the behaviors listed above. The school plays a very important part in the development of a child's sense of identity and compatability with the group. School is, in a sense, his society.

Here is a concept of alienation by Nathan Glazer which can serve us as a working definition. He says," it is a sense of the splitting asunder of what was once together, the breaking of the seamless mold in which values, behaviors, and expectations which were once cast into interlocking forms". It incorporates the idea of the holistic

nature of the human being, and the psychological insights and expectations about human bahavior associated with it. Was this separating of the child's nature into disharmonious parts happening to the children we were teaching. If so, what could I learn about it? What forms might it take? What was there about the school environment and the interactions among the people which could possibly be associated with it?

This project was carried out while I was teaching in the elementary grades in Livonia, Michigan in the mid 1970's. I had visited and taught in other schools for about eight years, before this time and had taught in two to seven man teams. About two years toward the end of this period were directed towards a concentrated effort to understand the phenomena I later came to call alienation.

The basic approach was to look at how children were actually doing their daily work. Their perception of their work experiences might be very different from that which their educators thought it was. I observed the action in the classrooms and noted their structures and organization. I related these things to their working conditions. I also used several techniques to find out what the children were thinking and feeling about learning and goals. These methods were DUSO (Developing Understanding of Self and Others),

values clarification lessons, Goldfish Bowl discussions, self-awareness units, and Glasser Circle Discussions. I collected records of these activities for about two years.

My viewpoint was as a teacher, a highly involved, participant observer. I tried to go beyond the teacher role of teaching and assigning work. I hoped to understand what these work assignments looked and felt like from the child's view, from the receiving end.

I came to believe that many of the possible causes of children's negative feelings came from their perception and experience of school as a work place which limited and distorted, thwarted and diminished their desire to learn. I hyposthesized that some of this might be because of the way in which the work in its processes and content was designed and implemented.

After this time period, two more years were spent in designing, carrying out, and evaluating a curriculum and classroom organization which I hoped would be less alienating. During this period I worked very closely with my teaching partner, Judylynn Carlson.

An additional year was spent in organizing the data, reading, theorizing, and formalyy describing what I had learned.

It was especially fortunate that Judylynn and I were able to work together. We could discuss our work

creatively. The intersubjectivity we experienced gave us the inspiration to continue a very difficult and challenging project.

During the course of this presentation I will first describe the background and environment of the classrooms I am talking about. Next, I will offer you a selection from the data I gathered. I hope these will illustrate the sources of the core themes which developed. The meanings ascribed to them and their interpretations will follow. Lastly, I will describe how the new "experimental", if you will, classroom was actualized and evaluated. These years of working out this new kind of learning situation used and developed the actural informational fruits of what I had learned from the phenomenoligical research.

Since it is a necessary part of any research, I have tried to become as aware as possible of the biases and presconceptions which influenced me.

I began to teach when my children were of school age. I had enjoyed watching them learn. I remembered the determination, tenacity, and concentration which characterized many of their activities. Watching their joy in discovering and mastering their world as it unfolded was exciting; a sad contrast appeared all too often in the classroom settings with which I was involved later. These children often evidenced bored docility, a lack of enthusiasm

and pride about their work. Their uncommitted attitudes and unmotivated behavior, unless forced to change by the teacher's manipulations, shocked and affronted my conception of what learning and school should be.

I assumed that children are naturally curious, energetic, and venturesome. If learning was seen by them as drudgery, then we must be doing something wrong. I placed a lot of work and involvement in doing something about the situation.

I recognize my humanistic, idealistic, even romantic bent. My assumption was, and still is, that this distressing situation can and should be changed. So I no doubt, have the biases one would associate with a restless reformer.

The study began as a response I felt I had to make to concerns which had become more and more urgent as I gained teaching experience. This was during the period when many critics such as John Holt, Charles Silberman, and John Kozol were calling into question a broad range of educational practices and pointing out defects in our classrooms. I suppose it was natural that I too was critical of what I was doing.

These writer had offered convincing evidence of the apathy and hostility to school of many children especially in ghetto schools. This was often explained by too great

a lack of congruence between the values of the school and those of the family culture. The other main cause, it was said, was that repeated academic failure gnawed away at the child's self-concept, until he lost all ability to try.

However, I was teaching in a rather well off, middle-class suburb. When I moved to Livonia, it was an expanding district with a good school system. My school was brand new with two big IMC's. The principal was able to select teachers who expressed a commitment to team teaching and innovation. We adopted an advisory council form of organization, so that we worked more or less successfully in a collegial relationship with each other for about seven years.

We were a dedicated, hard-working staff, and there was a good deal of enthusiasm, innovativeness, and hope in the air, in which I shared.

Yet I could see children evidencing the same boredom, the "turning off", and the death of intellectual curiosity that our critics had described, but, of course, to a lesser degree. Still I was challenged to understand these phenomena. In spite of our efforts, it seemed that a good number of children by the time they reached 4th grade or thereabouts, had begun to lose much of that original zest for learning.

The problem, I thought, was this: although I knew I could not forget or totally discount the influence of school-home incongruency or the effect of failure as alienating factors, I felt I had to look at what else was happening in their lived-school-world. I could see these behaviors in children who were not failing, and who had normal family backgrounds. I wanted to see what it was that was going on, that was so intrinsically, and functionally a part of a so-called "good" educational setting that it was not seen or even considered harmful or alienating by well meaning teachers. I would have to try to "bracket out" as it were, other factors, and concentrate on seeing what the children were experiencing.

In the next few paragraphs, I will describe some of the behaviors and incidents which constituted the raw data. It was fortunate that the team teaching situation often provided more and easier opportunities for observation and recording than a self-contained one. I was able to watch the children working, and frequently I could talk with them about what was happening.

For instance, what did the child think about when he asked the teacher, "Can I sit with John to read?" and was told, "No, you have to sit by yourself!" Or what about being told to mind your own business when another child asks you for help? A child told me the teacher didn't

want him to cheat, but that he hadn't been going to. The child has had helping others defined for him as wrong and himself as untrustworthy.

I remember a room I visited where the teacher told the class she would take points off their math grades if they talked while she recorded the grades. Can one's effort be define and changed by something entirely extrinsic to it? I wonder how experiencing that affects you?

A child takes an unfinished art project which he was called from in a hurry and crunches it into a nearby desk. Does he, perhaps, begin to feel, that it's better not to put too much effort or enthusiasm into anything, since he may not be able to finish it anyway?

Another common occurrence-----a fight between two children. The teacher says to Matthew, "You shouldn't be angry at Joe. He didn't mean it. Besides there's no fighting in school". Joe probably did mean it. What is Matthew going to do with this anger and resentment? What must he think, as sometimes happens, when he remembers that his father just told him last night. "Listen, if that kid bothers you again, punch him in the nose".

What about the child who ask, "Can I take extra work home?" And is told, no. Just, no. No explanation. The puzzlement on her face said a lot.

You may recall the enthusiasm for Brunerian discovery

learning. Our school adopted the Hilda Taba Social Studies which emphasized the teaching of thinking skills through the use of inductive reasoning strategies. Gathering the basic material was fine, but I found it exceedingly difficult to involve all the children in reasoning about the data. There were usually quite a few children who were capable students in the passive mode, who simply couldn't venture into hard thinking where it was almost impossible to psyche out what answer the teacher wanted. The security of the "right" answer was gone, and they didn't know how to test and search for ideas in a school setting.

Another kind of situation deals with the confusion created in a child's mind about why one does things, and what one may expect about people's motives for action, and what is really important to people. I watched one day while a teacher set up an elaborate competition between the boys and the girls to stage a welcome for a stranger who was visiting the school, but a real reason for wanting to welcome her had not been developed. The winners would get to be the hosts, and the welcome had to appear spontaneous. What happens to a child's sense of integrity when he is manipulated like this?

How does the child resolve the double message about how you should cooperate in school, and then the next minute he hears, "Let's see who can beat everybody in the

spelling bee.

But of course, some of these things may stir half-forgotten memories of your own school days.

Workbooks have long been considered with horror by some educators, but they are still around in great numbers, and sad to say, used as busy work. I have had to work with them enough to wonder if the different topics, presented out of context on successive pages are not seen as pleasant variety by the user, but rather experienced as an essentially purposeless, meaningless jumble.

One also sees things like this: a child laboriously copies sentences from the board and underlines all the wrong things. He hasn't understood the idea at all. He has not raised his hand for help because he can't even phrase a question. What is his state of mind when he realizes the wasted effort and is blandly told to do it over?

As I reflected on what I had been seeing, several themes began to emerge. One was <u>passive behavior</u>; another, was <u>caution</u> about sticking hour neck out artistically and intellectually. Another was <u>disinterest</u> in the work at hand unless the teacher had used "really good" motivation techniques. We all know the old "saw" about teachers thinking that teaching consisted of stuffing knowledge into a child's head. What I saw was the tragic reciprocal of

this, ie. the child sitting, waiting for the stuffing to be done.

Another idea seemed to be that of holding back from commitment to work for fear of failure or disappointment.

A theme appeared which can best stated as a jarring discrepancy between the child and his natural learning style. The reasons for doing work often are not clear or derived from any goal of the students. I have had many interesting discussions with children about why we have certain subjects in school, and the grown-up reasons, while often trusted, really make little sense to them.

Recess made sense. Recess is important to children because for at least a few times a day, to adapt an idea from Maurice Roche, intention, body, time, and social world are reunited. Values, expectations, and behaviors again form the seamless mold of an integrated person.

I want to say at this point, that I have known fine, warm, inspiring teachers who manage incredibly well, given the constraints of the institutions in which they are embedded. However, it would be untrue to say that these distressing things I have recounted to you do not happen.

In organizing and interpreting the phenomena I thought I saw several important relationships with alienation theory. The first of these was that children usually had little choice or control of topic, time, place, companion, or

mode of learning, Karl Marx had used the concept of alienation to describe the effects on the personalities of the 19th C.English factory worker of industrial processes and conditions. Could an analogy, pale though it might be, be drawn to the work conditions of my children?

Besides the lack of choice and control, another possible practice which could be associated with alienation theory was the heavy reliance on group teaching, which tended to make for an impersonal encounter between teacher and student. This was because no particular teacher question is directed at any one child. Frequently, it is a rhetorical one, and the teacher answers it herself and goes on with her agenda. Even the child who has been called on serves only as a foil for the teacher to impart some information. Could the children be perceiving this as someone not knowing them or caring about what they knew or wanted to know?

Frequently, teachers, including myself, talk in too abstract language for the children. We leave them frustrated, confused, and unsure of themselves.

A possible alienating pattern of school life is the organization of the school day which cuts across the natural learning proclivities of the child. A sort of chopped up or compartmentalized view of the world of learning prevails. The schedule is the ruler of all. This notion of bureacratic rationalization has been brought out well by

critics such as Neil Postman and Charles Silberman.

Another idea, which is, of course not original with me, seems to fit in here. Many of the interactions which make up the life-world of school are artificially or slightly dishonest because of the inexplicit, (to the children), mechanisms of the hidden curriculum. These are the behaviors, attitudes, and expectations needed to maintain conformity, homogeneity, and surface smoothness, in order to carry out a program of compulsory attendance and large group instruction. Could this environment have anything in common with the factory work place where all spontaneity and personal interactions must be shaped, even determined by the demands of the work process and goals?

In this next part I discuss my use of the theory of alienation. I found Marvin Seeman's article, On the Meaning of Alienation in the American Sociological Review of 1964 most helpful. He posited five dimensions of alienation which I used in interpreting and organizing my findings. I looked at the conditions and dynamics in the classroom in terms of these dimensions and then attempted to provide an improvement or correction to the inadequacies I saw.

First, there is powerlessness. This aspect of alienation is defined as a lack of control over the physical environment, the activities pursued or their social context.

Second, there is isolation, either emotional, physical, or subjective. Here, I think of the rows of desks, no talking rules, work alone rules, or being isolated as a punishment.

Third, there is self-estrangement; a split in the sense of identity stemming from experiences more severe than mere role adaptation. This can be caused by the placing of demands for belief or conformity on the child, which are too different from his experienced reality. For instance, my examples about the classroom visitor, or not being able to recognize and deal constructively with emotions like anger.

Normlessness: Robert K. Merton has described an interesting notion about this in his book, Social Theory and Social Structure. He uses the discrepancy between the attainment of culturally designated goals and the lack of the means available to the person to achieve them in a given situation to postulate the causes for deviant behavior. Deviant behaviors may range from withdrawal to rebellion. These, too, can be seen in a school. They reflect a kind of normlessness, in that if the work demanded is too far above the child's ability, she may turn away from it, since she is unable to accept the norm, or demands for achievement, but is unable to accept the fact of her incapability. She may be unable, also, to find something else to believe in, Children can have this experience when conflicting

values like the disirabilty of violence and non-violence are both defined as good by the important people in their lives, or when competition and cooperation are muddled.

This whole analys s, of course, obviously owes a great deal to Karl Marx's writings about alienation in industrial work life. I am also indebted to writers such as Erich Fromm in The Sane Society, Herbert Marcuse in One-Dimensional Man, and Phillip Slater in The Pursuit of Loneliness, and others. Dorothy Sayers in her book, The Mind of the Maker and in her essays, Unpopular Opinions , was especially helpful when I was thinking about creativity and the meaning of work. These authors helped me to reflect on the ways the schools mirror the society's view of work and of the way these views are institutionalized in them.

The dialectical process of using theory to reflect on the children's and my experiences was an exciting and challenging one. I would interpret data and find the data forcing rethinking and reinterpretation. A further search for meaning often brought new insights and challenges. Robert Blauner in his book, Alienation and Freedom, the Factory Worker and His Industry, summed it up very well, if a trifle pedantically. He said,"Work that permits autonomy, responsibility, social connection, and self-actualization furthers the dignity of the human individual, whereas

work without these characteristics limits the development of personal potential and is, therefore, to be negatively valued". I found this particularly stirring since, I believe that education is at its best when it concentrates on the development of human potential. Would it be possible to provide a work setting that would at least partially return the initiative and responsibilty to their rightful owners, the children in our classroom? Could we personalize the curriculum? Could we pace it so that they could succeed?

As I mentioned before, the school climate was such that Judylynn and I could design and implement a classroom and curriculum which we hoped would alleviate some of the conditions we had thought to be alienating. We would try to build an atmosphere of trust and openness to growth for the children.

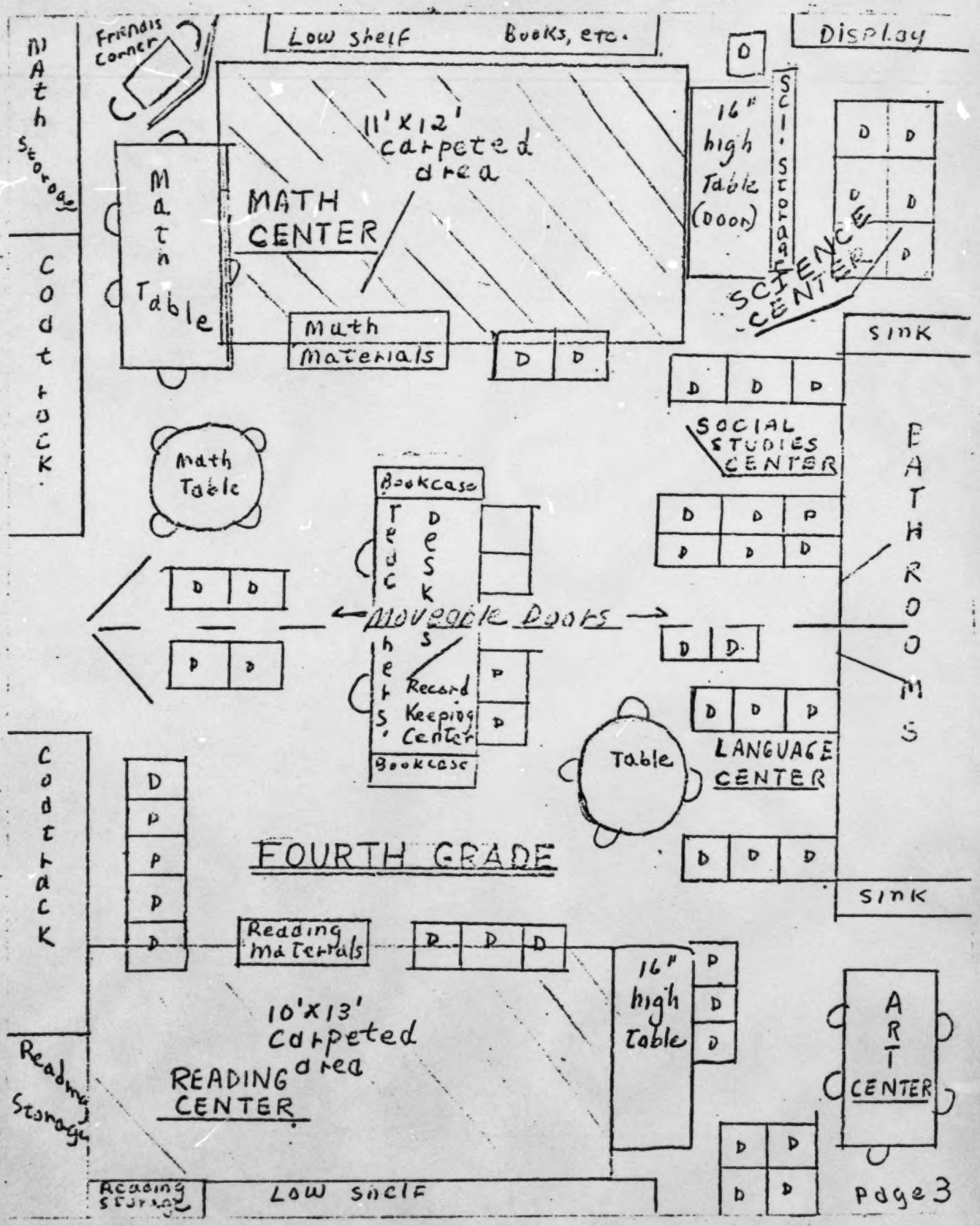
Drawing on her experience with an open classroom at the Flynn School in Vermont, and on our knowledge of the materials on the open classroom which were popular then, we designed what we called the Self-Selection classroom. This was not a free, do-it-yourself, or don't-do-it place, but a structured environment. We believed that all too often when children were moved from a traditional to an open situation, they were released from external tyranny into an exhiliarating, but dismaying and rather purposeless

experience. Most children had not yet built the internalized work habits or sense of the structure of a task which would make it possible for them to operate as independent learners and to use their freedom wisely.

It was vitally necessary to teach the children to gain control of their learning so that meaningful responsibility for it would become possible for them. We set up work areas, learning centers, if you will, which dealt with the main curriculum. These were not extra credit places. The children soon excitedly realized that they were being given choices about the flesh and bones of what they thought school was for. Our room looked like this: (see next page). There were carpeted areas for quiet work and group meetings, free space to move around in, and places to store one's own things. Cooperative clean-up was encouraged by the use of small groups responsible for their own clean-up and for a part of the room.

We tried to provide an experience whose tone was one of serious respect for the children's and teacher's time and effort, as they engaged in learning together. We acted right from the beginning as if the children would naturally take their own progress seriously, and they did!

During the next two lyears we created new work processes and means of self-evaluation for the students, and carefully observed what happened. We constructed a variety of sequential kits, concrete materials and lab materials. We also used a number of materials in our IMC's which opened


Math Storage
Friends Corner
Low Shelf
Books, etc.
Display
11'x12' carpeted area
MATH CENTER
Math Table
16" high Table (Door)
Sci. Storage
SCIENCE CENTER
Math Materials
Cod track
SINK
SOCIAL STUDIES CENTER
Math Table
Bookcase
Teacher's Desk
Movable Doors
BATHROOMS
Record Keeping Center
Bookcase
Table
LANGUAGE CENTER
Cod track
FOURTH GRADE
Reading materials
16" high Table
10'x13' carpeted area
READING CENTER
ART CENTER
Reading Storage
Reading Storage
LOW SHELF
SINK
Page 3

up new opportunities for choices, responsibilities, choices, and their consequences. We spent at least the first two months gradually introducing the children to the process of setting daily goals, then weekly ones. We began each morning by talking over each child's plans for the work time. Then at noon we helped them assess their progress. Also at the end of the day for about eight months the children spent about twenty minutes writing a journal of the cay's experiences.

The four ways, then, by which we were able to obtain good data on the new classroom, were these: one, was the individual teaching contacts we had with the children as they asked for help or showed us work they had done. This was very rewarding, but exhausting, because we had perhaps as many as 50 contacts an hour for three or four hours. We had to learn the exact needs and ways of thinking of each child, but we got to know them better than we had ever known any other group of boys and girls. Second, we kept track of each child's academic progress through the use of kit record keeping systems, and the weekly schedules they used, and the actual papers they had done. Third, we assessed each child's weekly schedule on a weekly basis, providing feedback for them for the next week's planning. Finally, there was the daily journal, which offered us a chance to learn about their feelings about what they were doing. These we spot checked and saved for later

analysis.

Of course, there were a few children who required a great deal of direction and who spent months just acquiring a taste of the idea of thinking and acting for yourself, and to others. It was marvelous to share in and reflect on the obvious pleasure that emerged more and more as the children cholse to learn, to enjoy learning, and to see their progress as it happened.

On the next page is an example of a weekly schedule. In the boxes for each day the child would put a number to indicate the order of his choices. As you can see, the child was given considerable leeway in deciding the mode of learning and of the time, place and companions, if any, with whom he would work. There were no artificially formed groups, except in Social Studies, which was a system-wide adoption. We identified skill needs and taught "workshops" on that skill to those who needed it, and then directed them to the appropriate practice, etc. The pace of the work was their own, neither waiting for others to finish or dragging along always last in the group. It was possible to do a lot of praising for fine effort.

We observed one very notable thing, the almost total absence of teacher-child discipline problems. The adoption of a facilitator role rather than that of a coercer, made many motivation problems disappear also, This freed a lot of energy for teaching. Another style of acting which

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

NAME:

Week of _____

READING	M.	T.	W.	Th.	F.
Comprehension Kit B,C,D					
Phonics Kit					
Language Skills Kit					
Read, Study, Think					
Reading for Concepts					
Random House Red/Blue					
SRA					
IMC S-80, BCT, BMIR, FTA					
Filmstrip Story					
MATH					
+,-,x, ÷ Skills					
Math Book					
Cloudburst Lab					
IMC ICSP, ISUA, SINGER					
Fraction Box					
Math Game					
LANGUAGE					
Imagine and Write					
Story Starters Box					
Ginn Enrichment 7 Kit					
Creative writing cards					
HANDWRITING					
Zaner Envelopes					
Overhead Projecter					
Handwriting Kit					
SCIENCE					
Science Center					
Filmstrip Report					
Science Book					
Individual Project					
LIBRARY					
BOOK REPORT					
ART TABLE					

How Did I Use My Time This Week? Good ___, Fair ___, Need to Do Better Next Week ___

What Will I Plan To Do Next Week?_____

SPELLING					
Spelling Book					
SRA Spelling Kit					
Superpower List					

developed nicely was partner-to-partner learning and tutoring. We conferenced with children four times a year at report card time to evaluate their progress with them. A summative evaluation was done at year end consisting of tests, conferences, and an attitude survey about the classroom by the children. Standardized tests showed better than average growth for the group. Interesting too, was the wide spread of ability levels that opended up as they worked up to their natural abilities. The increase in self-confidence and responsibility for their own progess, could not be measured on a test, One had to see them working. We did have many visitors who encouraged us.

So to summarize what had happened: I had done a phenomenological research project which ahd consisted of observation, living in the world of the research environment, and analysis and interpretation of behaviors in the classroom around the concept of alienation. I had used the five dimensions of sociological alienation theory to focus on and characterize what I believed could be the causes of alienation arising from an overly rationalized work environment, which satisfied organizational rather than educational priorities. The Self-Selection classroom was designed and operated in a manner which would, as much as we could make it, create a sense of autonomy, personal worth, and responsibilty in the child's view of his school

experience. Our children showed a definite increase in their persistence and enthusiasm for learning. The usually accepted need to correct discipline problems and to provide motivation for working were sharply reduced.

If this analysis and description has some validity, as my experiences convince me it does, a serious question must be answered. What can we do to make more clear the connection between these freedoms to choose, to engage one's self wholeheartedly in a naturally flowing work process, and the increase in self-direction, enjoyment, and accomplishment we observed? The sensitivity of classroom teachers and administrators to these relationships must be increased, without causing defensiveness on their part. They are following widely accepted pedagogical practices. The need to communicate this vital, but often overlooked syndrome of alienation is a very big challenge indeed. Teachers need help and encouragement to look for the subtle constraints on initiative, self-confidence, and total involvement in learning. If they don't do this, we will continue to have discipline problems and passive, irresponsible students.

Teachers and administrators and other educators may not be able to do much about society's major ills, but they can do something about academic failure. This other important and neglected area of alienation is also something educators have some control over. The challenge to <u>teach</u>

children to become active, involved, responsible learners by creating an environment in which they can experience these things now can be realized.

However, it will not be easy, Here are just some of the things which would have to be examined and probably changed:

1. changing the teacher's role from director/monitor to facilitator and counselor,

2. changing the teacher's perception of the nature of the learning process as an often varied, idiosyncratic and creative one, rather than predictable, standardized, and systematic,

3. Making school schedules less of a first priority, or at least less rigid,

4. individualizing skill subjects and using other areas of the curriculum such as art, science, and social studies as arenas for growth in cooperation and human understanding.

5. encouraging and training teachers to employ "humanistic, mental health" ways of working with all the people in the school,

6. providing a wide range of materials, self-checking and divergent in thinking style and mode of learning rather than relying on textbook teaching for the most part.

Many of these suggestions are not new and have been strongly advocated by many other people, I know. But I think that the argument for renewed efforts to realize them may be seen as more urgent when their lack is related to such a self-defeating phenomenon as alienation.

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